

VZCZCXR08263
OO RUEHB1 RUEHLMC
DE RUEHLM #0581/01 1650326

ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 130326Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8283
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0954
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7943
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 6115
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4445
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2105
RUEHNW/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4418
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3518
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8550
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5995
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0688
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2822
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000581

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/13/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PTER MOPS PREL CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT TELLS PRESS TO TOE THE LINE

REF: A. COLOMBO 528
B. COLOMBO 507

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires James R. Moore for reasons 1.4(b, d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Two senior journalists told Embassy that President Rajapaksa called in the heads of Sri Lanka's major media outlets on June 6 to criticize their coverage of the war and instructed them to avoid publishing any sensitive or derogatory military information. The President implied that unless the press cooperated, the government would pass strict war censorship and defamation legislation. The meeting represents the latest in a series of actions taken by the government to intimidate the media into publishing only positive accounts of the war. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Defense journalist Iqbal Athas (protect) told Pol Chief that on June 6 President Rajapaksa called in senior editors and publishers of most of Sri Lanka's major media outlets for an impromptu two-hour meeting. Athas received an account of the proceedings from his employer, the publisher of the Sunday Times. The President administered a severe tongue-lashing, telling the journalists that he would not tolerate them printing stories critical of the government's war effort. He reassured them about their security, however, saying that those who had left the country recently (reflets) should return. But critical articles on military topics must stop. Athas reported that Rajapaksa accused the victim of a recent attack, journalist Keith Noyahr, of not cooperating with authorities in their investigation. The President told the media representatives that failure to comply with his directive would lead to the government legislating strict censorship and criminal defamation measures to keep them in line.

¶3. (C) Daily Mirror defense correspondent Sunil Jayasiri (protect) confirmed Athas's report in a conversation with PAO. Jayasiri also had not attended himself but was briefed on the meeting by the paper's owner Wijeya. When the media leaders arrived, Secretary of Defense Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Media Minister Yapa, Presidential Secretary Weeratunga and Director General of the Media Center for National Security Lakshman Hulugalle were also in attendance. The President, according to Jayasiri, demonstrated that he "wanted to

prevent journalists from writing on sensitive military and political matters." He also instructed them not to report on the meeting. (Note: No accounts of the meeting have appeared so far in the Sri Lankan press.)

¶4. (C) According to Jayasiri, the President instructed the media not to disclose any sensitive military information, including arms procurement, troop movements, potential targets, promotions and transfers of security personnel -- and generally "anything that would damage the morale of security force members." He reassured the journalists of their security. He touched briefly on the case of Keith Noyahr, saying that Noyahr was not cooperating with the investigators and was thus hampering the investigation (ref B). (Note: our contacts have reported that Noyahr's abductors threatened his family if he cooperated with the investigators.) The President singled out defense columnist Iqbal Athas' writing for severe criticism, and also brought up a column by Sunday Lankbima News Editor Rajpal Abeyaike, in which Abeyaike called the President a dictator. Lankbima News Managing Director Thilanga Sumathipala apologized to the President, promising it would not happen again.

¶5. (C) Jayasiri said the meeting was precipitated by the desire of the Defense Secretary, along with the Army and Navy Commanders, to introduce draconian legislation imposing war censorship. The military also wanted to reinstate Sri Lanka's criminal defamation law, abolished by the previous administration under former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The President reportedly resisted this

COLOMBO 00000581 002 OF 002

pressure at the most recent Security Council meeting, saying he would personally speak to media chiefs and give them one more chance.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The meeting represents the latest step in an escalating campaign by the Government to intimidate and restrict media coverage of the war (ref A). With the rising cost of living, the government's popularity rests on the public's support of its military offensive against the Tigers. The President is clearly concerned that if the media is allowed to report on the war freely, it could contradict the government's narrative of steady progress against the Tigers and erode the foundation of President Rajapaksa's popularity. The GSL knows, however, that an overt move to legislate press censorship would attract worldwide criticism.

The Rajapaksas have therefore reverted to tried-and-true tactics of "friendly persuasion" to try to hold Sri Lanka's independent press in check.

MOORE